

TEXTILE STUDY GROUP OF NEW YORK

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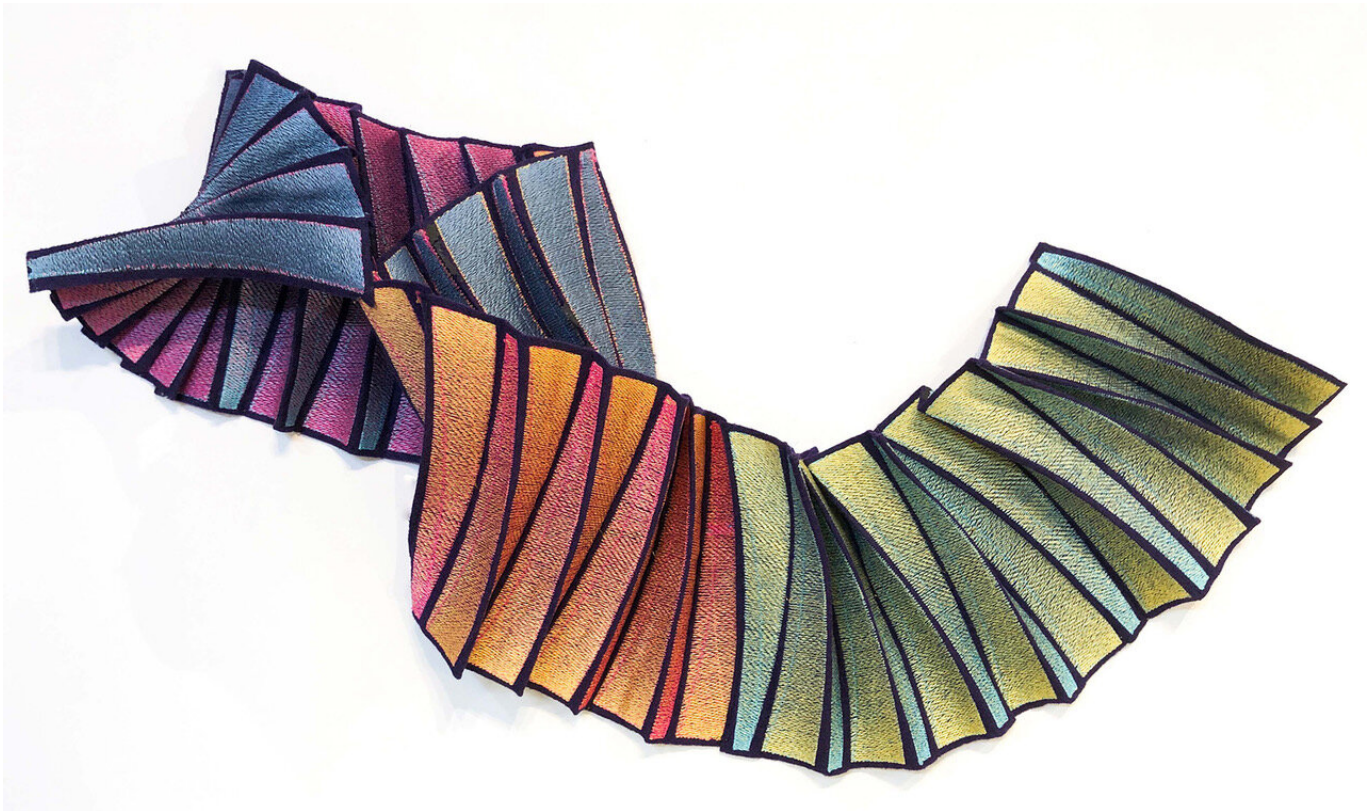
SUSAN HENSEL





Susan Hensel

I am always amazed at how I arrived *here*, steeped in digital embroidery,
making hard edged sculptures from soft materials!



Chromatic Wave 1, 24"w

My background and training are in the arts with a BFA in sculpture and painting. I worked for many years in ceramics, many years in papermaking, many years in book arts and many years as a gallery director. My "hobby time" was thoroughly fiber: hand spinning, sewing, hand embroidery. Materials with their haptic and scientific qualities always obsess me.

I moved from Michigan to Minneapolis roughly 17 years ago as a well-established and collected book artist, and opened Susan Hensel Gallery in 2004 showing emerging and mid-

career artists.



Maybe seven years later *something remarkable happened!*

THIS IS A STATE FAIR LOVE STORY

The Minnesota State Fair is unlike anything I had ever experienced in Michigan. They call it the "Great Minnesota Get Together" for a reason. The fairgrounds are the size of a small city and millions of people attend every year. Attending the State Fair is part of what turns you into a *real* Minnesotan. That year, to broaden my experience of the fair I made a point of going to the "Demonstration Hall" where merchants try to sell you their newest products: Ginsu knives, food storage innovations, cookware.

I wandered around a corner and stood *transfixed!* There was a large display of sewing machines of all sorts, but in the middle, stitching away was a single needle embroidery machine. It was automatically stitching a Donald Duck wearing his trademark blue shirt.

I did not care at all about Donald Duck, nor did I care that the machine was stitching hands-free.

What captivated me was the *blue thread*. I had never seen such a rich, deep, sparkling blue in my life. I HAD TO POSSESS IT!

I bought my first machine on credit and wrote grants until I received one to buy the digitizing software. Then I failed my way up the learning curve! While I have worked with computers since they were room sized contraptions, this software mystified me for a long time. I fulfilled my grant from the Jerome Foundation by the skin of my teeth!



Susan Hensel with Chromatic Flutter

FAST FORWARD A FEW YEARS

Now the software is second nature and I have added 2 multi-needle embroidery machines to my studio and have made discoveries that have allowed me to investigate color in the three-dimensional realm.

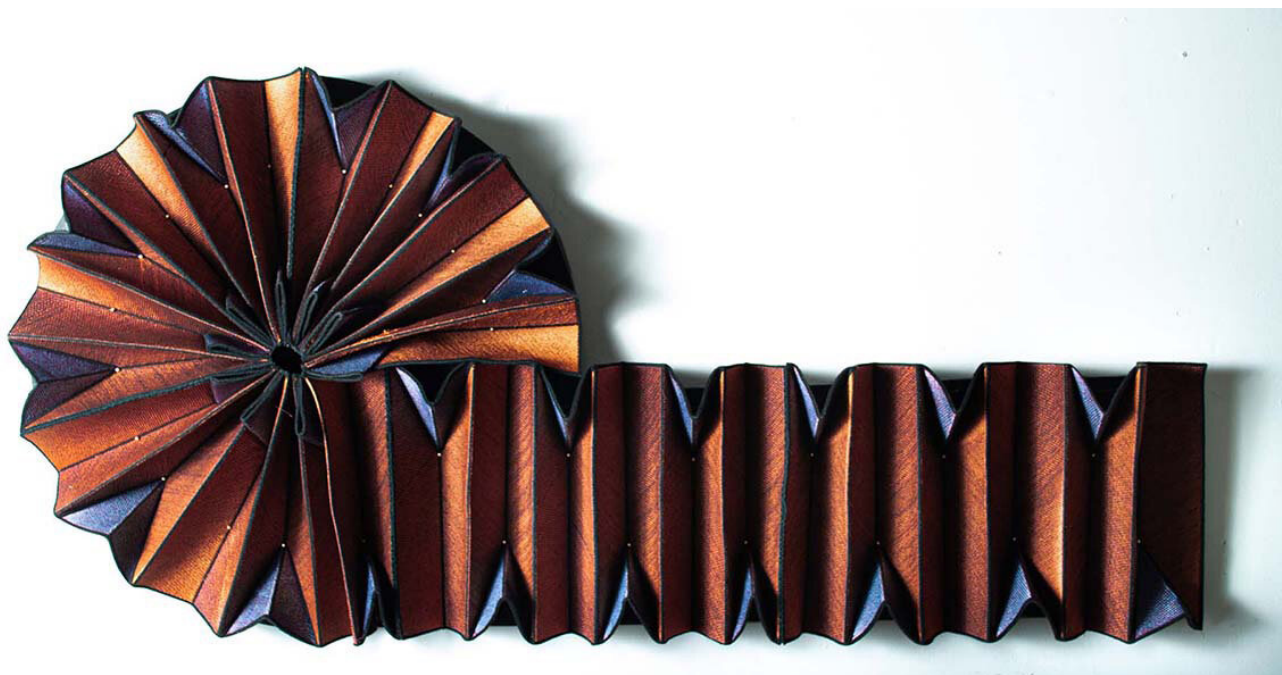
Almost every summer I create a remote residency for myself on the shores of Lake Superior. I pack up the dog, oodles of tools and materials and drive north. I always have goals for my residency that involves rest, wine, reading and a particular project or area of study. About three years ago the area of study had to do with the interaction of color in gradients with changes in substrate color. Sounds so technical. More precisely the project was *"Let's play with color and see what happens."*

Polyester embroidery thread is pretty remarkable stuff. Its cross-section is *trilobal* or three-sided. *Why is this important?* Our perception of color is based on the wavelength of the light that is reflected off a surface. The direction of that reflection changes the wavelength.

So what?

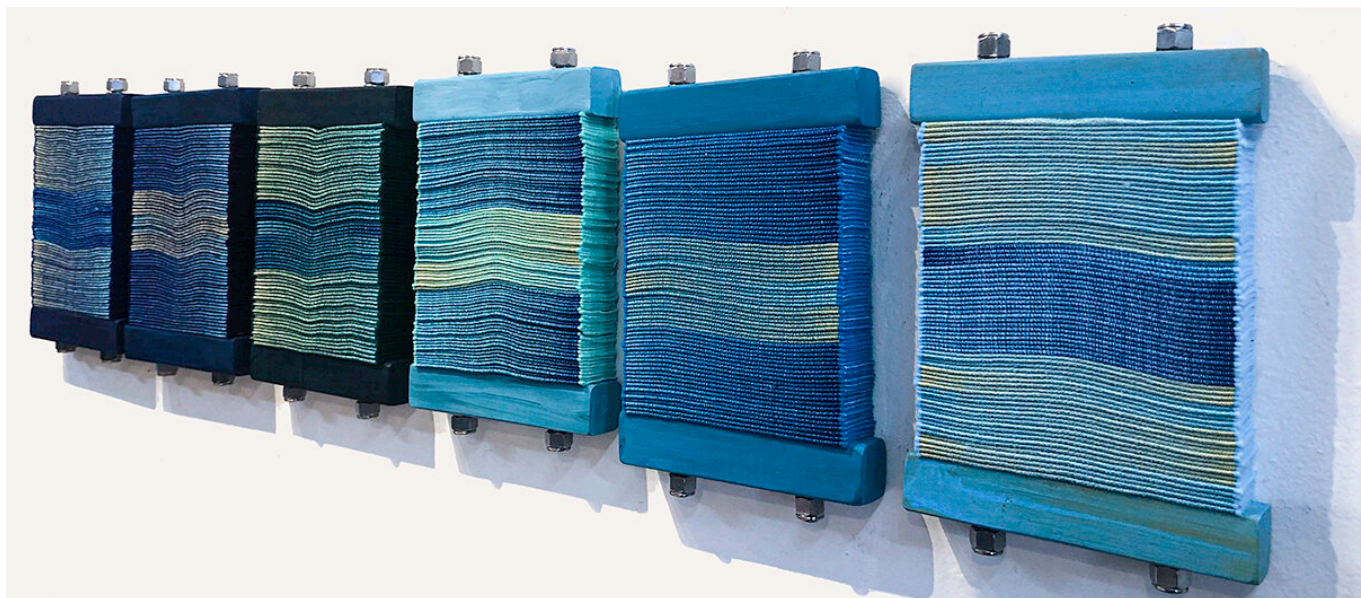
Well, the trilobal thread scatters the reflected light in multiple directions at multiple wavelengths. That means that a single *blue* thread will have the appearance of many more blues of different saturations and hues. So, when you walk by a piece, or manipulate a stitch- out (sewing lingo for a practice run of a design), the colors seem to subtly change and sparkle!

While playing with the color gradients I noticed that bending them also shifted the color. So, I began designing the embroideries with fold lines and ... *voila!* Sculpture was born. Using my background in paper and book arts I investigated folding structures that could be applied to polyester felt to make sinuous and free standing pop-up forms.



*ESCAPE CAPSULE, 52" w***TODAY IN THE STUDIO**

The work of studying the properties of color in space continues. By limiting my palette to 2-3 colors and manipulating stitch angle, folds, and stitch order, many more colors are perceived. In *ESCAPE CAPSULE*, above, there are only 3 colors of thread: orange, red and blue, creating a delicious coppery glow.

*Chromatic Bookblocks, 50"w*

In *CHROMATIC BOOKBLOCKS*, above in the blue series and in the composite photo at the top in some of the warmer colors, only three threads are used: golden ochre, royal blue and aqua. The color of the felt substrate is different in each block. This series grew out of play. I noticed that the gradients, when bent, intensified their color play and when they were put under pressure, even more so. So, I started stitching, designing in holes that I cut using a sailmakers drill. I inserted threaded rods, carefully designed wood bars, and cranked up the pressure. When the series is complete, it will be a full color wheel of blocks.

Digital embroidery may be hands free, but it does require attention, intuitive looking and a willingness to *look failure straight in the eye* and ask, "How can I fix or use this flubbed-up thing?" There are so many ways things can go wrong: design errors, thread choice errors, humid weather, dry weather, bumping the machine off center, things falling out of the hoop, broken needles, bird's nests that require cutting the fabric apart.

These designs are a real commitment of time to the machine. Each "bookblock" takes a full week in the machine just to stitch it. Some large designs take more than a week. And, yes, that is way faster than hand embroidery. But, this is not a substitution for hand embroidery. It is its own thing, related to other kinds of embroidery, but with different materials and problems, and different potentialities.



TWIST 1, 24" w

I keep boxes of the goofed up stitch-outs to play with and inform me. TWIST is a really cool work made from the early flub-ups that eventually became CHROMATIC BOOKBLOCKS. When I originally designed the parts, they were made to be accordion folded and then drilled. *Well, that didn't work!* Household drills twist and snarl the felt, leather punches just dent the surface and go dull. Cutting them out by hand, seventy-two ½"holes per "bookblock," was instant tendonitis. I tried melting the holes: they were messy, and the fumes would probably kill me! Research found me the sailmaker's drill. And play encouraged me to twist the melted hole widgets onto acrylic rods. *SCORE!*



Fallen Monuments, 48"w>

susanhenselprojects.com

Textile Study Group of New York / info@tsgny.org * For Newsletter / newsletter@tsgny.org

